

# *Closing the Digital Divide*



# CCN Dialogues

COUNTY COUNCILS NETWORK

March 2022

# Roundtable

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## *The Digital Divide: Looking at how to ensure equal access to digital technology in rural areas*





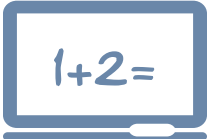
# INTRODUCTION

The last two years has increased the reliance on digital communications for people to remain connected with their loved ones and their communities; to work and maintain an income; as well as access vital services. Although the shift towards a digital society was evident prior to Covid-19 emerging, the experience of the pandemic and the associated lockdowns appears to have vastly accelerated this process.

However, as digital infrastructure increasingly evolves into a public utility as important as water or electricity, the 'Digital Divide' between those who are able to easily access digital services and those who, for whatever reason, are not is growing, and is likely to continue to grow without policies which address this issue. Digital connectivity is moving rapidly from being a desirable luxury towards a fundamental need. As such there is increasing expectation that this issue should form a key foundation of the Government's Levelling Up agenda

In October 2021, the County All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) published its report *Levelling Up: Digital Connectivity in Counties*<sup>1</sup> which highlighted that 190,000 households and businesses in county areas are still unable to receive even the most basic broadband of 10 m/bits per second – almost treble the rest of England combined. Equally county and county unitary authorities contain older demographics with populations that are often less digitally literate and in need of more support to access digital services.

For these reasons, with this now increasingly very much a county-based issue, the County Councils Network in conjunction with BT convened an expert roundtable of county chief executives and leaders to discuss how the Digital Divide might be narrowed. Participants in the roundtable were asked to consider three key aspects perceived to be driving the 'digital divide', to better understand the scale of the challenge, the potential solutions, and the role of local authorities in narrowing this divide. These three aspects were defined as follows:

-  **CONNECTIVITY**
-  **AFFORDABILITY**
-  **LITERACY**

This short report provides an overview of key findings from the discussion which emerged around these three key concerns and concludes with recommendations for the way forward.

[1] CCN County APPG – *Levelling Up Digital Connectivity in Counties* (2021)  
<http://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/download/3895/>

# THEME 1 – CONNECTIVITY

The first and principal concern of the County Leaders and Chief Executives sitting on the roundtable was that of connectivity for their areas. This was felt to be a particular issue for county and county unitary authorities given their geographies included most of the England's more remote and inaccessible communities – which are vastly over-represented in the 'last 5%' of homes where the commercial viability of delivering digital services means they are often left behind in infrastructure roll out.

## 'Levelling Up' as a digital issue

It was agreed that digital connectivity an increasingly important issue for people – and had become substantially more so after the pandemic and the associated experience of lockdown. One local authority remarked that based on pre-pandemic trends of digital take up:

*“We have seen probably between 5 and 10 years' progress in a year.”*

It was no longer viable to see connection to digital devices and utilities as a desirable luxury – it was increasingly becoming a functional essential. Those present at the roundtable recognised this, discussing the extent to which access to digital connectivity was now rapidly approaching the status of a utility akin to water or electricity.

However, it was not always clear that the country was treating it as such. In particular it was obviously difficult to expect private operators to put in connectivity infrastructure themselves where there was no commercial viability. Instead there needed be more partnership working between the public and private sectors with communities to make this happen:

*“It doesn't seem to me we are approaching it as a utility. We've got this challenge at the moment that we've got a series of private operators but the public are seeing it as a utility... we're not really asking the question whose responsibility is it to put this [infrastructure] in place?”*

Patchy coverage was an experience common to local authorities around the table from all parts of England. Even in counties which nominally had 'good' coverage in terms of household access, there were often large geographical areas where connection was still poor, with limited prospect of it improving at pace:

*“Even in local authorities relatively near London we have terrible connectivity in large areas – when we talk about the percentage penetration of broadband that's by premises not geography.”*

But the accelerated shift to hybrid working brought about by the pandemic – with many more business now looking to offer a blend of working from an office with working from home for their employees – means that public and commercial pressure for digital access is only likely to increase as a policy priority in the coming years. One marker of the emerging status of 'utility' was the more influence this issue was expected to have on determining house prices, particularly after people's

experience of the pandemic. Access to decent connectivity was likely to play an increasingly pivotal role in determining where people decide to live:

*“You wouldn’t buy a house without electricity or water. Why would you buy a house without connectivity?”*

Given the poorer rates of connectivity in county and rural areas this is likely to become a growing issue of equality. Government – at both the local and national level – needed to put more consideration in how to work with commercial partners and communities to ensure that as digital infrastructure is rolled out it is done so in a way that provides consistent levels of service to all parts of the country. One council chief executive conveyed the thoughts of his many rural residents through the comment:

*“We all think 5G sounds very exciting – but we would like to experience 4G first.”*

It was felt there perhaps needed to be more of a focus – at national and local level to determine the level of standards that should be expected for both access to and application of digital services:

*“If there aren’t standards then it won’t happen”*

The Government’s Levelling Up agenda offers the opportunity to ensure that measures are put in place to ensure access to certain standards of digital services as a right as it becomes a growing matter of inequality in the post-Covid world. The scope of the promised Levelling Up White Paper must recognise that the issues of equality visible to people are no longer just about physical access to services such as transport, but also virtual access to the online world.

## **Understanding of Connectivity**

More fundamentally, though, the group was concerned to what extent the speed at which digital connectivity’s importance was reflected in both local and national infrastructure strategies, was at least in part due to fundamental understanding of what it means. For instance not many people outside the digital sphere fully understand yet the full potential that 5G may offer for connectivity. At the moment 5G is an evolving technology, but the real transformation will come next year when operators upgrade their infrastructure.



Strategies are often pursued on the basis of ‘putting in broadband’ or ‘rolling out 5G’ – where the reality is that the best way of extending connectivity to more remote communities will involve blending a range of different elements of infrastructure including 4G, 5G, satellite technology etc. This will present challenges for councils, though, not only in securing the investment. Whilst everyone wants decent connectivity there was consensus that planning issues like the siting of masts – particularly for 5G – were now often among the most contentious and objective issues councils have to deal with.

Councils – and indeed national government – need to ensure that they are regularly drawing from a full range of expert advice and guidance when developing their digital strategies, particularly given the pace at which technology was advancing. There needs to be a joined-up approach across different strands of infrastructure roll out, with clearer and consistent language used so that informed decisions are made strategically:

*“I’m a big believer in talking about ‘digital’ not ‘broadband’ or ‘5G’ as it’s all part of the same parcel – and Government policy needs to be joined up on that front.”*

*“How do we make sure we are ‘current’ given the evolving nature of tech.”*

### **Local authority infrastructure**

Although all the local authorities present wanted the best connectivity possible across their counties, there was also an understanding that this didn’t necessarily mean everywhere in a geographical area needs to be covered. The deeper question for councils was how that connectivity was intended to be used and achieving commensurate levels which delivered their local strategic goals.

It was also recognised that from a council’s point of view connectivity had to work at both ends. Yes – it is important that citizens were connected, but it was also important that county authorities delivered services which were making full use of this connectivity. This was becoming an increasingly important issue for many areas locally – one local authority chief executive noted that the last two years had been transformative in use of digital in their council:

*“We have moved from ‘digital by preference’ to ‘digital by default’.”*

Digital strategies also had to work to ensure they were as inclusive as possible. This included considering the language being used online by councils. For instance one local authority chief executive highlighted that a recent audit of their council’s website had shown the language used on it was often pitched as high as post-graduate level.

Finally there was discussion of the need for local authorities to usefully harness the sharp rise in the extent of data that will be generated by 5G. As the transformative potential for council services becomes clearer over the coming years more local authorities should start considering how they can capture that data and use it to improve services.

# THEME 2 – AFFORDABILITY

The second important concern of all the local authorities present was the increasing Digital Divide between families which could afford to access digital services, and those who couldn't.

## The cost of digital connectivity

The question was raised as to whether as connectivity moves towards being a utility how long it might be before accessing digital services would begin to be captured when calculating deprivation indices?:

*“It will come to a stage where deprivation will be measured on access to digital technology to be able do your homework and connect in a work environment in the same way as someone who is more affluent.”*

Issues of affordability had been spotlighted by the experience of lockdown given the vital importance of connectivity given its impact on education and the ability to work etc. The move for many towards home and hybrid working appears likely to be a lasting lifestyle change caused by the pandemic. This will mean access to some areas of the employment market will depend not only on access, but also the affordability of digital connectivity.

Although it is to be hoped that the main impact of Covid-19 is now behind us the prospect of further lockdowns in the future is now at the forefront of public consciousness, with cost an issue which will potentially need to be addressed in ensuring equality of digital access.

## Cost v culture as a barrier to take up

However, there was no clear consensus about to what extent affordability affected digital take up. It was accepted round the table that within counties it was possible to find sophisticated understanding and use of digital technology in some more deprived communities, whilst other higher income families did not even have a television. To that extent it was also postulated how far culture might also play a part in the Digital Divide alongside pure cost?:

*“I know there's been a lot of research that's been done on digital take up within some socio-economic groups, but I don't know if anyone's asked the question about why that is.”*

*“We have to make simpler systems... that's not a technology challenge, it's a cultural challenge.”*

Overall, though, it was clear that patterns of take up often came down to individuals themselves. For instance, some farmers are extremely effective at adopting technology into their businesses – such as using drones – and some aren't, just as some high street retailers have been adept at adapting to online commerce, whilst others have been playing catch up.

## Digital access to education

The experience during the pandemic has emphasised the ever-increasing importance of 'online' in education – particularly at universities, but also within schools. During the pandemic some families were not able to afford several devices to allow multiple children to study simultaneously during the lockdown, whilst conversely others were facing the challenge of a number of devices trying to connect to one hub and receiving slow service.

*“From the pandemic what we’ve learnt is whilst there might be connections in households... there is then also an issue with the number of devices which are connecting to one connection.”*

Other families would not even be able to afford the cost of basic internet connection – or would be forced to make trade-offs with other necessities such as food or heating. Yet more would be relying on using data allocations on their phones to access what local 3G or 4G services rather than being able to afford to put in more cost efficient wi-fi.

Drawing back to the earlier point made about house values being likely to be increasingly affected by broadband access, it was pointed out that for poorer families forced into renting there may be no choice about the level of internet connection that can be accessed. Lockdown presented and emphasised a new role for local authorities – often in partnership with schools – in enabling children and young people from poorer families to go online so they were able to learn. It is likely that this understanding of online learning as an essential component of education will remain even after the impact of Covid has subsided.

Going forward some council leaders suggested there may be some scope for doing more with Pupil Premium money or commercial discounts to support the rollout of digital technology to poorer households, and to keep the gains that had been made during the pandemic through initiatives that had helped roll out tech to disadvantaged families:

*“Is there an opportunity there around a device being made available that takes a bit from the school, a bit from the company, so that actually kids can utilise the connections that have been made?”*



## Affordability of services

Affordability was not just an issue at the level of the individual but also at organisational level. There was also an acknowledgement of the savings that could be made for more public services by more effective use of digital. One aspect of this, for example, might be in adult social care – something CCN explored in more detail in its report *Employing Assistive Technology in Social Care* in 2021. However, to unlock the full potential of these savings required not only access to digital connectivity, but a clear understanding of the affordability of installing technology based on the perceived return on investment from its use.

Additionally it was noted that communities can be quite resistant to being pushed towards digital services and it was often not understood why?

*“We have the mantra of ‘enable the enabled’. What the research is showing is that plenty of people who interact with the council already bank online and shop online, but for some reason they don’t want to deal with the council [online]. So we need to move [those people online] so we can leave the spare time to work with the rural household with no mobile phone.”*

Although this was acknowledged to be a ‘noisy’ problem it was generally quite small in terms of numbers of people. However, many councils indicated their ongoing updates of their digital strategies intended to include more dialogue with communities to determine what services can and can’t be easily ‘digitised’ post-pandemic. A potential solution would be to ensure there was phone-led support available to reassure people as services transition to digital:

*“I think striking the balance with someone on the end of the phone... to deal with [problems] but also continue to press on digital seems to be the way ahead.”*

[2] County Councils Network *Employing Assistive Technology in Social Care* (2021)  
<http://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/download/3604/>



# THEME 3 – LITERACY

The other principal driver of the Digital Divide was perceived to be how digitally literate citizens were.

## Age as a predictor of digital literacy

The most pertinent dynamic pertaining to digital literacy was felt to be age, with one chief executive stating:

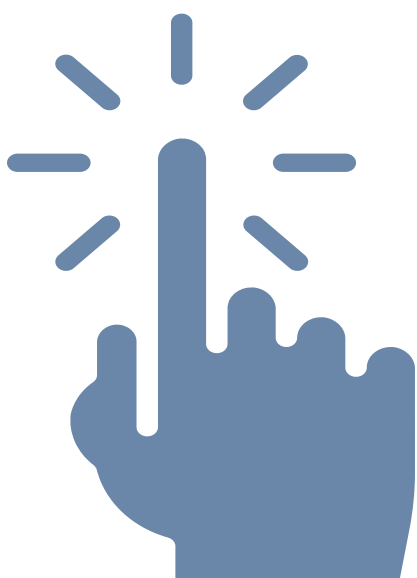
*“I’m still most concerned about older people being left behind.”*

There was consensus that there was a sharp divide now between older people who had become very comfortable with using digital devices – the so-called ‘silver surfers’ – and those who were being increasingly left behind with very little ability to use devices, which had been particularly highlighted during the pandemic with the reliance on digital means to access services and contact loved ones. This view was supported by a recent Age UK report which showed that 42% of those aged 75 and over did not use the internet at all.<sup>3</sup>

The discussion did acknowledge that the generational difference in digital literacy was likely to change over the coming decades (and the rates of internet use for the age groups just below 75+ reported by the Age UK study supported this view, with 75% of 65–74 year olds and 88% of 50–64 year olds saying they used the internet every day). That said, it was recognised that technological development was moving remarkably quickly and there was likely to be constantly new emerging digital technology down the line too, with the consequent risk of some people continuing to struggle to keep up with the zeitgeist:

*“How do we make that bewildering world of digital more accessible [for older cohorts]?”*

*“I worry about people getting boxed in to [a life that is] isolated, lonely not connected – can’t do the things that they now not [just] want to do but **need** to do.”*



[3] Age UK *Digital inclusion and older people – how have things changed in a Covid-19 world?* (2021)

At the other end of the scale, though, it was also postulated that although digital identity was becoming hard-wired into the lives of younger people (particularly the emerging 'iGeneration' of those born post-1996) it should not be assumed that they were all digitally literate in the way councils would expect. Whilst almost all young people will be highly familiar with utilising social media or streaming services, it is not clear how far some may still struggle with some aspects of the digital world such as accessing services online.

However, councils also need to understand the extent to which internet access for young people is now an inclusion issue – so much of their lives are lived online in parallel with the 'real world' and if they are unable to access this online life then it can be very difficult for them and risks them being excluded by their peers:

*“We may find [teenagers’] world alien, and we may abhor the fact that they’re connected persistently, constantly through that digital medium – but that’s just the reality of their lives, and without that they would likely be excluded.”*

### **Digital literacy as a barrier to digital strategies**

Digital literacy was seen as a key barrier to the full potential and realisation of digital strategies at local level. For instance issues around digital literacy led to some discussion about how far local authorities can move their services can become purely digital, but this was getting closer:

*“We know that there are some people for which accessing services digitally is a challenge but we’re not using that as a basis to say we need to maintain all sorts of channels, we’re using that as reason we need to keep some specific mitigations in place.”*

There was particular concern about ensuring that people were given appropriate help to embrace digital technology. Some councils mentioned they had just started to get some of their digital skills programmes back up and running after they had been sidelined because of the pandemic. The key objective would be to try and make what can seem a bewildering world for many more simplistic. One example would be using local libraries to offer support and guidance – Library services in some local authorities now offer 'digital buddies' precisely to help address digital literacy issues and support local citizens with basic access issues:

*“When [local authorities] think about inclusion we need not just be thinking about it not in terms of access to a connection but the content and the literacy skills that enable you to utilise it.”*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## **1. Join up digital strategies, using clear and consistent language and common standards**

There must be better joining up of various digital strategies – 4G, 5G, Satellite etc. – into a clear and cohesive overarching vision which uses clear and consistent language to describe an overall digital fabric that can be easily interpreted at both national and local level.

## **2. Recognise Digital Connectivity as a key element of the Government's Levelling Up Strategy**

As digital services are now becoming akin to utilities such as water or electricity – particularly in the wake of the pandemic – access to Digital Connectivity must form part of the Government's infrastructure plans within the Levelling Up agenda, especially recognising the growing impact of this issue on rural communities.

## **3. Develop strong partnership working across government and other stakeholders**

The ever-growing strategic importance of digital services means that local government needs to be able to work cohesively as part of a wider national strategy for engagement with commercial partners and the needs of their own communities. There needs to be closer collaboration with all stakeholders to ensure that digital strategies are executed to their full potential.

## **4. Ensure digital strategies receive ongoing assessment and monitoring**

The sophistication of digital technology is expanding at breakneck speed. A digital strategy conceived in 2021 is likely to be radically under-resourced for the needs of 2031. For that reason digital strategies at national and local level should be required to be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure they remain fit for purpose.

## **5. Support affordable access to digital services for all communities**

Given the growing importance of digital services to people's lives, there needs to be a concerted effort to ensure people's access to basic online services is not constrained by affordability issues. Councils had already employed some strategies to alleviate this problem during the pandemic, but should also consider how they might be able to innovate further in the future, such as how Pupil Premium money might be used to support digital access for children from more deprived backgrounds.

## **6. Support digital inclusion through offering education and training for communities**

As well as ensuring digital connectivity for their citizens, local authorities should also ensure that they offer appropriate support for all their residents to learn how to access services – such as by offering support through libraries, and potentially by reaching out to older people who are less likely to be digitally aware.

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*With enormous thanks to those who contributed to the roundtable:*

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